



## **Acton Early Years Initiative – Overview and Summary of Findings**

The Acton Early Years Initiative is a group of organizations and agencies with the goal of bringing schools, families, community agencies and local government together to promote early childhood development and reduce the number of children who are developmentally vulnerable in Acton. The initiative focuses on education, research and community engagement.

This descriptive case study documents how the group came together to respond to local research showing a high percentage of developmentally vulnerable children in Acton, and the processes they used to create change during the time period of September, 2014 to September 2015. It is our hope that this work will create awareness of the importance of early childhood development, and provide an example for other groups interested in using a Collective Impact framework.

### **Research Questions:**

- 1) In the local context, what are the challenges and successes of an early years community initiative?
- 2) What processes support successful collaboration in a community action table? Is the Collective Impact framework a useful framework for this work?
- 3) How is data and evidence used at the community level to move an initiative forward?

### **Methods**

Five sources of data document the efforts of the initiative: observational field notes, photos, longitudinal results from a series of work group self-assessment surveys, qualitative key informant interviews and testimonials, and results from the Early Development Instrument (EDI).

### **Summary of field notes / History of meetings**

#### **Initial meeting: June 19, 2014**

Alison Hilborn, Maureen Harris, Shelley Lothian, Liz Wells

Alison provided background (low EDI scores in Acton discussion at principals breakfast), and desire to use RBA process to Turn the Curve. Discussed who should be at the table and how to start the process. Decided to go with a community data discussion where Shelley would present the data.

Liz interviewed Alison in September, prior to Session 1.

#### **Session 1: Community Data Discussion, September 26, 2014**

Links2Care, Robert Little, MSB, St. Joseph, Halton Families for Families, Knox Presbyterian Church, Preschool Team – Region, Community Living North Halton, Town of Halton Hills Parks & Rec, CCAC, YMCA, Inspire Halton, OKN

Shelley presented EDI data. Liz presented Collective Impact. Had a large group discussion about the Story Behind the Baseline. Lots of passion and excitement to do something about the EDI scores but overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem and where to start. Administered 1<sup>st</sup> Self-Assessment Survey, and the Right Now Survey.

## **Session 2: Developing an Action Plan, December 12, 2014**

Halton Region Health, Community Living North Halton, Inspire Halton, Links2Care, St. Joseph, Robert Little, MSB, OKN

Shelley presented the Turn 20 infographic. Everyone was energized. Created a sense of urgency. Someone from the schools said “we need to start somewhere – do this piece and do it well – then we can add on the other layers.” Liz facilitated a brainstorming session and development of an action plan. The group landed on building activity kits with a calendar to get parents focused on fine and gross motor skills. The Town of Halton Hills to work with Children’s Services to get funding for Monkeynastics. Maureen to lead creation of the kits. Administered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Self-Assessment Survey. Received an email after the meeting about being jazzed by the session and excited about our collective impact.

## **Session 3: Check-in for tasks (building the kits and Monkeynastics), January 8, 2015**

Town of Halton Hills, Monkeynastics, CAS, Robert Little, School Year Halton Region Health, Child Care Services Halton Region, Links2Care, Early Years Halton Region Health, MSB, Reproductive Health Halton Region, OKN

The group maintained ownership of the work and went straight to action. Most people had a role and were offering time and resources. Energy and passion was high. The group was already thinking ahead and framing this as a pilot that can be used to scaffold on for next year, other grades, or more people. The conversation expanded to other opportunities to continue this work (e.g., the registration night). Administered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Self-Assessment Survey.

## **Session 4: Activities update, February 20, 2015**

St. Joseph, Robert Little, OKN, MSB, CAS, YMCA of GTA, Community Living North Halton, Town of Halton Hills, Preschool Health Region, Links2Care, Reproductive Health Halton Region, Children’s Services Halton Region

Very exciting meeting. High energy and lots of feedback from working group members. Teacher from MSB talked about the activity kits. “The calendar helped us [teachers] have a framework for talking about how we’re helping and supporting fine motor activities with kids”. Not sure whether parents are using them. Got a lot of great feedback from the kids about the kits. Teachers at Robert Little handed out the kits at the parent teacher interview to enhance interaction with parents around the importance of gross and fine motor. Everyone was most excited about the Monkeynastics. Kids love it. Teachers love it. “It’s a great way to kick off to think about how to do it [physical activity] on our own now”. The teachers wanted to find a way to sustain the work and create their own Monkeynastics. Talked about building their professional knowledge and being proactive – how to reach these kids before kindergarten. Also talked a lot about our community partnership – a lot of pride in the way we’ve come together to problem solve around the EDI. Continued discussion about what else can we do – how can we continue to build on this great work? “We need to get to these parents before these kids get to school”. Forgot to administer the 4<sup>th</sup> Self-Assessment Survey.

## **Session 5: Maintaining the momentum, March 27, 2015**

MSB, St. Joseph, OKN, Robert Little, Preschool Health Halton Region, Community Living North Halton, Reproductive Health Halton Region

All activities are now complete. The group reflected on the process and on our partnership “The power of this connection – it should be like this.” “Our work put this issue on teachers’ radars” Talked about increased understanding and recognition of fine motor activities, e.g., noticed more items on the bulletin board that were fine motor related. Discussed some of the challenges we experienced. Noted that the speed of action likely contributed to not anticipating the problems (e.g., permission forms, board policies) – but everyone came together to problem solve and get it done. Seen as a good learning piece. Reflected on the importance of

common messaging and good communication moving forward. Want to “continue to build on our work and messaging.” Also want to continue to build on our partnership. “The board is watching and is very interested.” Moved to next steps discussion: goals are to: 1) continue to build school/community partnership (focus on parents), and 2) continued gross motor focus. Next steps discussion: focused on creating a stronger link between families and schools before school starts. For example, Meet & Greet Day (bbq). Continue to build community connections – and opportunity for families to get to other parents. Thinking about using Prospect Park. Administered 5<sup>th</sup> Self-Assessment Survey.

### **Session 6: Continuing our work and developing a new action plan, April 24, 2015**

Reproductive Health Halton Region, MSB, Children’s Services Halton Region, OKN, CAS, St Joseph, YMCA of GTA

The group returns to action planning for the event at Prospect Park. Discussed who else needs to be at the table – suggestions included: parent councils, PSST, and a school board member. School staff talked about how they are using ideas from the activity kits with high need children – those at risk group – easy to target. Started to brainstorm ideas for the Event (passport; school spirit; photo booth; maze/obstacle course). The group worked together to identify central objectives for the Event (to help them focus): building a relationship between schools and families; increasing awareness of physical literacy – the value of being prepared for kindergarten. Worked together to identify possible barriers (i.e., timing, teachers as volunteers) and find solutions. Everyone contributed by offering to do certain tasks. Administered 6<sup>th</sup> self-assessment survey.

### **Session 7: Event planning, May 14, 2015**

Links2Care, OKN, Children’s Services Halton Region, St. Joseph, CAS, MSB, Robert Little Parent Council

This meeting focused on event planning and was the last meeting attended by the OKN Research Associate – the group was moving solely into event planning. There was minimal discussion or focus on physical literacy. The group was consumed by tasks and resources. Working with tight deadlines. The group is getting excited. Taking good ownership over tasks. The group likes action. People like to feel included and a sense of movement towards a goal. Administered 7<sup>th</sup> self-assessment survey.

### **Summary of self-assessment survey findings (sessions 1 – 7, exc. 4)**

**Confidence:** The percentage of people reporting very high confidence in their ability to understand EDI results increased over time from 38% in session 1 to 60% in Session 7. Confidence in their ability to convince others that support for early childhood development is crucial in Acton dropped to lower levels in sessions 5 and 6. It was highest at Session 2 (90% very confident) when the group developed direction and action plan. The percentage of people reporting very high confidence in their skills to make a difference was at 100% at Session 3 – when the group was working on building the kits and getting Monkeynastics ready to roll out. There was a drop in the percentage of people reporting very high levels of confidence that they would participate in efforts to Turn the Curve in Acton (e.g., Session 2 100% were very confident vs. 40% in Session 7).

**Beliefs:** Many beliefs increased dramatically following the first session – especially beliefs in their ability to make a difference in decreasing EDI vulnerability in Acton (moving from 38% strongly agree to 90% strongly agree in session 2). Beliefs in the importance of working together to tackle EDI vulnerability remained steady throughout the 7 sessions (ranging from 75% at session 1 to 100% in sessions 2 and 3, and then hovering around 80% for the remaining sessions). Some decreases in beliefs were seen. Specifically, belief in their individual role to play in decreasing EDI vulnerability in Acton fell sharply in sessions 6 and 7.

**Behaviours:** Session 3 had the highest percentage of people frequently engaging in activities to promote and advance the work of the initiative across all measured behaviours (talked to coworkers, thoughts about ways to decrease EDI vulnerability, inviting others to take part in the work, included the initiative as part of

organizational or community planning). Session 3 was the point at which the group was actively working on tasks and urgently attempting to get their actions into the field before the next cycle of the EDI. Conversely, Session 6 had the lowest percentage of people frequently engaging in activities to promote and advance the work of the initiative across all measured behaviours. This was especially the case for inviting others to join the work (0% reported doing this a lot, and 88% reported doing this some, a little or not at all). Session 6 was when the group was coming back to action planning and developing new tasks to move the initiative forward after a short lull following the success of Monkeynastics and the activity kits. Activity and movement towards a goal always brought the group together and renewed their passion and interest.

### **Summary of observations**

**Quick wins:** The group was energized by action and getting the activity kits out quickly gave the group a sense of accomplishment. It also fostered a willingness to work together to overcome obstacles.

**Scale:** The infographic played a key role in mobilizing the group. It gave them direction and a place to start. Framing the problem on a smaller scale made it 'doable' and the work of building the kits wasn't overwhelming or something that needed big resources. Everyone had small tasks and asks to take back to their organizations that didn't require huge commitment of time or resources.

**Urgency:** Creating a sense of urgency was critical to moving the group out of planning and into action. The problem was framed as requiring intervention before the next cycle of EDI data collection, forcing the group to move ahead without typical hesitations, speculations or red tape. However, the urgency did create some problems but the group worked together to overcome them.

**Passion:** Passionate people at the table made a huge difference – everyone wanted to contribute what they could to make a difference in our group efforts. People believed in the importance of our work and saw the value of working together to help make a difference.

**Meaningful data:** Framing the data for the group helped to give them a clear direction. The first session included too much data and made the problem too big. Once we had targeted the findings on a specific domain, the group felt comfortable moving in a particular direction. Once that was done, the data didn't take over the conversation or paralyze continued efforts.

### **Five Conditions of Collective Impact**

**Common Agenda:** "Turning the Curve on EDI Vulnerability in Acton".

**Backbone Support:** OKN brought the data to community partners and presented it in a way that could be understood and acted upon. OKN stayed with discussions and helped facilitate.

**Continuous Communication:** Partners discussions and planning sessions resulted in motivation and coordinated actions.

**Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** Kindergarten teachers ensured each family received an activity calendar and kit with instruction on how to use them. Jumpstart, Halton Hills chapter and Children's Services, Halton Region secured funding that enabled the schools to integrate fun, physical activity programs into the school day. Community Living North Halton, the Town of Halton Hills, the Acton Hub, Public Health, Halton Region and Links2Care all contributed to the kits.

**Shared measurement:** Our evaluation is tracking partnership outcomes, and the results of the "Turning the Curve on EDI Vulnerability in Acton" plan could be seen in the next cycle of the EDI.

**Notes on Collective Impact as a framework for this initiative:** The group thrived on the idea of working together and forging a deep community partnership. The topic of partnership came up countless times, in many different ways, at each meeting. Although the concept of Collective Impact was new and only discussed in detail once at the beginning, people immediately recognized the value of the framework for our work. The group did not take up the elements of Collective Impact in a proscriptive manner. For example, they never said things like “how do we ensure we’re moving towards shared measurement”, or “what’s our common agenda?” We had a few people at the table who were well versed in Collective Impact and could identify which elements of CI were strong (e.g., backbone, continuous communication, mutually reinforcing activities, common agenda...) but I don’t feel that as a framework it held a lot of power or made a difference in the work. Except as a tool to aid the Research Associate’s reflection and for case study purposes, no one else at the table cared about the framework – it didn’t galvanize like the infographic. I think the lesson is: Collective Impact helps interested outsiders examine some of the elements that contribute to successful initiatives, but it’s not something on the ground folks inside the initiative need to think about as long as the backbone (OKN) is doing its job and making sure those pieces are in play.

### **Some observed indicators of OKN’s backbone effectiveness<sup>1</sup>**

#### **Guide Vision and Strategy:**

*Partners accurately described the common agenda:* All members of the initiative, and other audiences who were aware of the initiative, were familiar with the goals and objectives of the initiative. Turn 20 was one example of this.

*Partners and key leaders increasingly look to the backbone for initiative support, guidance and leadership:* The OKN hub coordinator was a strong backbone support for this work. She made numerous observations that the group was working well together independent of her explicit direction, but still looked to her to help manage the overall strategy and work plan, including enlisting new stakeholders, taking minutes, supporting the development of the budget and fund raising.

#### **Support Aligned Activities:**

*Partners articulate their role in the initiative:* Partners were very good at talking about how they could help the work and how their particular professional role could benefit the work of the initiative. For example, teachers clearly described how they worked to engage parents during parent-teacher meetings around using the activity kits to help promote awareness of the importance of physical literacy in early childhood development.

*Relevant stakeholders are engaged:* The group consistently checks who else should be at the table and makes appropriate invitations. For example, when the group moved onto event planning for the Acton Kindergarten Fun Fair, they engaged and sought the participation of each school’s Parent Council. This resulted in additional funds for the event as well as volunteers.

*Partners communicate and coordinate efforts regularly, with, and independently of, backbone:* The partners meet regularly (at least once a month), and communicate by email. They are cognizant of including all relevant people on emails and minutes.

*Partners report increasing levels of trust with one another:* Trust was established early on because they were able to work together successfully to overcome obstacles to running the Monkeynastics program in schools. Add details of the problems? They also developed trust by each organization agreeing to contribute small resources to the building the kits and following through on those commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> Findings based on analysis of field notes from meetings, and correspondence (email, phone) with partners. Indicators of backbone effectiveness adapted from FSG and Greater Cincinnati Foundation’s document ‘Backbone Effectiveness: 27 Indicators’. Retrieved April, 2015 from: <http://www.fsg.org/blog/27-indicators-backbone-effectiveness>

## **Establish Shared Measurement Activities:**

*Partners understand the value of shared data:* The EDI data has been a key feature in showing the value of shared measurement in the group. Without the EDI data the group would not have been able to dive into the data so well to clearly identify a direction for the initial work of the initiative. They are eager to see the results of the EDI and are willing to work together to find other data to measure their progress (e.g., the self-assessment surveys).

*Partners make decisions based on data:* The community data discussion and the infographic are key examples of how the group made decisions based on data, and of their comfort using data to support their planning and decision-making.

*Partners utilize data in a meaningful way:* The infographic is also an important example of how the meaningful data can galvanize a group and provide the group with clear evidence of why the work is important, how to address the issue and by how much.

## **Build Public Will:**

I think it depends on who you define as the public. What audience? If it's families and citizens, we still have work to do here. Some of the indicators are: community members are increasingly aware of the issues; community members express support for the initiative; they feel empowered to engage; and they increasingly take action. We sent the kits home in kids' backpacks, but have no idea if parents used them and what the response to it was – did it make a lasting impression and change behaviour? If the audience is our community partners (e.g., schools, health, etc), then we are doing this. The teachers loved Monkeynastics and have doing in-services about gross and fine motor skills. They are finding ways to create their own Monkeynastics or other ways to do it again in the future.

## **Advance Policy:**

*Target audience is increasingly aware of the initiative:* We need to make more progress here. Hopefully the Fun Fair will contribute to increasing awareness of our work in Acton.

## **Mobilize funding:**

*New resources from public and private sources are being contributed to partners and initiative:* Each of the parent councils contributed funding to the Fun Fair event. Each of the partners contributed resources to building the kits. Two partners helped secure funding for Monkeynastics.